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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ANKARA 002886

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/03/2017

TAGS: PGOV PHUM PREL OSCE TU

SUBJECT: TURKEY: GREEK ORTHODOX ARCHONS CLAIM ECUMENICAL PATRIARCHATE SUFFOCATING UNDER SNAIL-PACED REFORMS

REF: A. ISTANBUL 996

1B. ISTANBUL 638

Classified By: Ambassador Ross Wilson, reasons 1.4 (b),(d)

11. (C) Summary: Turkish government policies are slowly suffocating the Ecumenical Patriarchate (EP), according to representatives of the Archons of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, a U.S.-based group of Greek Orthodox laymen. In November 29 meetings, the delegation told Turkish officials crawling reforms have not ended State interference in the EP's election, training of clergy, expropriation of church properties, or denial of legal status to the EP. The recent "vandalism" by Ministry of Forestry officials of a centuries old church on Heybeli Island (ref A) was the latest example of harassment of Turkey's Greek Orthodox minority. Ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) Vice Chair Egemen Bagis told the Archons more time is needed to continue AKP's ambitious reforms that inevitably will help broaden religious freedom. MFA U/S Ertugrul Apakan promised to reevaluate issues surrounding the election of the Patriarchate and Holy Synod, but cautioned the Archons to not expect sudden, revolutionary changes. He called on the Archons to use their influence to help improve the situation of the Muslim minority in Greece, but stressed that the GOT does not link the two issues. Though frustrated by the lack of high-level access during this trip, the Archons continue to see dialogue with the GOT as an important component of their overall strategy to defend the survival of the Patriarchate. End summary.

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Archons Highlight Continuing Problems  
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12. (C) Archons Anthony Limberakis, Christopher Stratakis, and George Rockas visited Ankara November 29 to discuss four main problems the EP continues to face. First, the GOT's requirement that only a Turkish citizen residing in Turkey may serve as Ecumenical Patriarch severely impedes the Patriarchate's ability to freely elect its Patriarch. Turkey's Greek Orthodox community has dwindled to approximately 2,000, and there is no available successor in Turkey to replace aging Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I. Second, the Patriarchate is unable to train new clergy because the Halki Seminary has been closed since 1971, when Turkey nationalized all private institutions of higher learning. Third, the State continues to expropriate Greek

Orthodox properties. Fourth, the GOT continues to deny legal personality to the Patriarchate, as evidenced by the Court of Appeal's (Yargitay's) July ruling that rejected the ecumenicity of the Patriarchate (ref B). The Archons called on the GOT to take concrete steps toward resolving each of these problems, and to rectify the recent destruction of church property on Heybeli Island by Ministry of Forestry officials (ref A).

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AKP Counsels Patience  
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¶13. (C) AKP's Egemen Bagis told the Archons that AKP had done much to modernize Turkish society but needed more time to implement changes. Bagis noted that the Muslim population also has concerns; pious Muslim women are not allowed to wear Islamic headscarves on university campuses. He urged the Archons to be patient and trust in the AKP's good will. In Bagis' opinion, most of the issues are related to reciprocity -- it is difficult to grant broader rights to Turkey's Greek Orthodox minority unless Athens improves conditions for Western Thrace's Turkish Muslim minority, he stated. On Halki, Bagis believed the issue would have been solved if the Patriarch been "a bit less stubborn" and accepted PM Erdogan's suggested path. Limberakis praised AKP's progressive stance on overall economic and legal reform, but said improvements on religious freedom had been coming at "a snail's pace." The very survival of the Patriarchate is at stake, he noted. Stratakis said the GOT should recognize the Patriarchate as a "treasure of Turkey," a centuries-old institution providing spiritual leadership to tens of millions of Orthodox faithful worldwide. Bagis told the

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Archons their support for Turkey on the Armenian genocide resolution, trade, or other issues would provide political cover as AKP tries to improve the Patriarchate's situation. Limberakis said the Archons frequently support Turkey's EU accession bid and stand ready to help in other areas.

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Foreign Ministry Promises Reevaluation  
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¶14. (C) In a separate meeting, U/S Apakan told the Archons that Patriarch Bartholomew is a citizen and friend of Turkey; the GOT is trying hard to solve the problems related to the Patriarchate's survival. The GOT demonstrated its goodwill in 2004 when it allowed six non-Turkish Metropolitans to be elected to the Holy Synod. Limberakis recognized the positive step but wondered whether future governments would similarly turn a blind eye without a legal guarantee. Apakan underlined the GOT's stance on the use of the "Ecumenical" title: the GOT does not interfere with the Patriarchate's ability to freely use the title in its religious affairs but will not legally recognize the title. Apakan agreed to ensure the election issues are reevaluated with a "pragmatic mindset". He cautioned the Archons not to expect sudden or big changes. Noting that the GOT does not link the two issues, Apakan encouraged the Archons to use their influence to urge Athens to improve the situation of Greece's Muslim minority in Western Thrace.

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Request for Diyanet's Assistance  
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¶15. (C) Limberakis told Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) Vice President Izzet Er the Archons appreciate the Diyanet's moderate views and efforts to promote peace among religions. He asked for the Diyanet's assistance in encouraging the GOT to ensure the survival of the Patriarchate. Er responded that the Diyanet is in constant dialogue with the EP and supports efforts to have places of worship for all religions. However, the Diyanet does not

directly get involved in political matters. DCM encouraged the Diyanet to use the positive dialogue to solve time-sensitive issues such as Halki Seminary in the near term. Limberakis urged the Diyanet to leverage its well-respected reputation to promote concrete progress.

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EU - Coming Out of A Stall?  
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¶ 6. (C) European Commission political counselor Diego Mallado told the Archons that Turkey had made no progress on human rights reforms in the past year. On religious freedom, the EU documented some backsliding, including an accelerated expropriation process. The EU expected concrete progress in 2008, including re-passage of the Foundations Law to improve the property rights of religious minorities. Mallado said the draft law is imperfect -- it does not solve the issue of return of properties expropriated and then sold to third parties -- but is an important first step. Mallado noted the EU had set a new benchmark requiring the GOT take concrete steps on freedom of expression, including amendment of Penal Code Article 301 (insulting Turkishness), before the EU would open negotiations on the fundamental rights chapter. Commenting that the EU's ability to influence the GOT would depend largely on popular support in Turkey for EU accession, Mallado asked for Archons' support in convincing Europeans to support Turkey's membership. Limberakis said the Archons strongly support Turkey's accession and would continue to explain to their contacts the importance of including Turkey in the EU.

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Vandalism of Historic Monastery  
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¶ 7. (C) In all meetings, the Archons lambasted the Ministry of Forestry workers who had "vandalized" the centuries old "Church of the Transfiguration," a small monastery on the same island as Halki Seminary. An Archon had donated money

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for renovation of the monastery, only to see the windows and walls of the building bashed in by "thugs," Limberakis said. Bagis and his AKP colleagues had heard nothing of the issue, and could not understand how it could have happened (although Turkish media covered it widely). Bagis promised immediately to look into the situation. At the MFA, Ambassador Haydar Berk said the EP had not obtained the proper legal permission to make such renovations. Ambassador interjected that even if that were the case, the appropriate recourse should be an injunction, not smashing up the structure. Apakan told the Archons an investigation is ongoing, and assured them that relevant authorities would renovate the building. At the Diyanet, DCM noted the Istanbul Governor had stopped the destruction as soon as he learned of it. She encouraged the Diyanet to help convince the Governor to continue his positive actions by conveying to him the cultural importance of protecting and restoring the building.

¶ 8. (C) Comment: The Archons did not disguise their disappointment in the lack of concrete reforms since their 2004 meetings with the then-Ministers of Foreign Affairs, Education, and Interior. They interpreted the GOT's failure to grant similar high-level access on this trip as a serious snub, and a sign of the GOT's lack of sincerity on its stated promise to help preserve the Patriarchate. Still, the Archons found some silver-lining in Bagis' assurances that constitutional reform would improve the situation for Turkey's minorities, and Apakan's clarification that the GOT does not link the issues of Athens' treatment of Muslims with Ankara's treatment of the Greek Orthodox. Despite some frustrations, the Archons said their visits complement efforts to pressure the GOT through legal mechanisms, and will remain an important component of their overall strategy to defend the survival of the Patriarchate. End comment.

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